

Biblical Good Trouble

One of my heroes has always been John Lewis. I am sure that you have heard about “good trouble?” That’s a phrase that he used sometimes to talk about the most important works of his life.

On May 4, 2016, he tweeted a picture of a bunch of people who were waiting to get on a bus. He described the picture this way: “55 years ago today, I was one of 13 original Freedom Riders who set out to integrate America’s buses. #goodtrouble.

Another time, when talking about why he once again began to use the protest tactic of the sit-in, he said “Sometimes you have to get in the way. You have to make some noise by speaking up and speaking out against injustice and inaction. #goodtrouble. That’s what he means by the words “good trouble”. A disruption of injustice. A willingness to put yourself on the line in order to do what is right. You may be getting into trouble, but it’s the good kind of trouble. It’s the kind of trouble that makes a difference.

This idea of “good trouble” came from his own experience as a black man raised in the Jim Crow South. Growing up in such a hateful political system, black people had to be very careful to try to avoid the violence that white people were allowed to direct towards them. In the graphic novel about his life entitled “March”, Representative Lewis talks about the warnings his parents would give him growing up. “Stay out of trouble. Don’t get in white people’s way.” That was not a baseless fear on their part.

From 1882 to 1968, 3,446 African Americans were lynched in the United States, with 73% of those lynchings in the South. When John Lewis was in high school in Alabama, just one state over in Mississippi, another teenage boy named Emmett Till was murdered by white adults who claimed he called a white woman “baby.”

Keeping your head down...not drawing attention...choosing not to correct people when they were rude or cruel...not getting in trouble...that is what kept you alive. It’s what kept your kid alive.

Representative Lewis learned something though: Sometimes you need to get in trouble to force a change. Sometimes the rules of the society or even of one small community are contrary to what is good and hopeful in the world. Lewis learned this. So, he started getting in good trouble, first as a college student integrating lunch counters in Nashville, Tennessee. Then, as a freedom rider. Continuing through his activities with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the marches across the Edmund Pettis Bridge in Selma, Alabama, into his work as a public servant, he found power and transformation in getting into “good trouble.” And, he helped change the world.

This morning, I want to suggest that you keep that idea of “good trouble” in mind as you hear these two stories, one of a father advocating for his daughter and another of a woman advocating for herself. These are people who are willing to get into good trouble. Now, they aren’t joining in national protests. They are mostly advocating for themselves and their families. But, in approaching Jesus, they both are willing to look at the social norms of their time, deciding

that they weren't beneficial to life and wholeness and they risked getting into good trouble to demonstrate their faith and find healing.

This is a story about two people getting into good trouble and about Jesus seeing the wisdom and care in their trouble making. They show us a way to be brave and follow Jesus. They show us the power of good trouble.

At first glance, with the gift of hindsight, a whole pile of cultural differences and 2,000 years of Christian tradition, neither of the two people's actions seem all that brave or unsurprising. Those of us who have read the Gospel stories for years, who have come to maturity knowing that Jesus can do amazing things, we aren't surprised to read the story of two strangers approaching Jesus. I mean, that's what you do when you see Jesus. You ask him for help. How could you not?

Well, there were some pretty big reasons why they wouldn't that we miss because our cultures are so different. But, if we don't know about these differences, we miss some of the power of their stories. We miss the good trouble. So, let's take some time to see why they might have a hard time approaching Jesus in a way that we wouldn't. It might help us figure out how to approach Jesus too.

First, the woman who touched his garment. She is a woman alone in public who slides through the crowd to touch the hem of Jesus' clothes. According to the research I have read, in the era in which they lived, it was common to believe charismatic teachers and speakers had the power to heal. This comes up in other parts of the New Testament, like in Acts 5 when it's just Peter's shadow that falls across people and they are healed and in Acts 19 when the apostles handkerchiefs or aprons touched people they were healed. Their clothes were an extension of their body, so therefore, they are an extension of their powers.

Knowing this part, we shouldn't be surprised that she would be content to touch his clothes. For someone with faith, they would have believed that this would have been enough to heal them. The clothes thing, it turns out that's not the surprising part. It's the fact that she thought she could touch him at all that we should pay attention to.

You see, her particular physical ailments, likely gynecological in nature, would have deeply affected her ability to engage with other people in her community. Leviticus 15 has a lengthy set of regulations declaring that a woman with a discharge is unclean – and that anyone who touches her, her clothes or anything she had touched would become unclean as well.

She would not be allowed to even set foot in the outer courts of the Temple, and if her bleeding extended beyond her normal monthly cycle, she would have to keep to herself until the discharge ended, and then wait the prescribed eight days before taking two sacrificial doves to the priest to be declared acceptable again.

Now you know that the conservatives out there love to quote Leviticus when it comes to the parts where it talks about man laying with man being forbidden. But somehow no one has ever quoted Leviticus 15 to us, you know, the one saying that women cannot enter church during their menstrual cycle.

In any case, this woman knew that she was violating big time rules by even being in the crowd. If she is found out, everyone who's even brushed against her would have to bathe, wash their clothes and wait until evening to rid themselves of her contamination, but she was ready for some good trouble.

Her poverty, a product of going bankrupt to pay medical bills, would have also isolated her from the community. To reach out and touch a man, a teacher, who was not a member of her family, someone whom she would then make unclean...these actions put her at even greater risk of ostracism.

But she has heard of Jesus' power and his compassion. The risk ended up being worth it. He felt her touch. When she admitted to what she had done, rather than run away, he praised her, calling her daughter, and sent her on her way in health and peace. She no longer bled. And, she was restored in relationship. And other people learned from her bravery. That is some good trouble.

Jairus is another one who risked trouble in going to Jesus. Jairus is the administrator of the local synagogue. He would have been close with the Pharisees. They were the ones who ran the synagogues. Remember, Jesus and the Pharisees were often at odds over their interpretations of the law. So I'm not sure that it would have looked right for a synagogue administrator to go to a traveling teacher for healing.

And, to go to such lengths for a daughter, that might have appeared unseemly...undignified, especially as the man fell at Jesus' feet. It was a risk to go to Jesus. He put his good relationship with local leaders in jeopardy. There were other, more appropriate ways to seek help, but he didn't. He believed Jesus could help. He calculated the risk, the conflict with his community, and the reward, the restoration of his daughter's health, and decided to push the bounds of what would be deemed appropriate. He pushed his way through the crowd and found Jesus.

Jesus ended up doing something pretty risky too. Shortly after healing the woman, people came up to him and Jairus and said that Jairus' daughter was dead. There was no need to come heal her anymore. That could have been the end of the story.

If the reason Jesus was going was to heal her and she was already dead, why go? Why risk ritual contamination by being near a dead body? Dead bodies, like bleeding women, were unclean.

But death did not stop Jesus. He looked at Jairus and said, "Do not fear, only believe." Then, bringing along Peter, James and John, Jesus went to the girl's bedside. There was commotion surrounding the girl's house when they arrived, caused by the wailing of the professional mourners. Professional mourners are mentioned many times in the Old Testament. People

who were particularly good at wailing and moaning found the most work. Some professional mourners were farmers who were done for the season and took this as a side job.

So the professional mourners were already there. Jesus said, "This girl is not dead but sleeping." With her mother and father by his side, Jesus said to her, "Get up." And, she did. And Jesus told them to feed her something, and they did.

And he said to tell no one what had happened. I'm not sure why he did that. Maybe he knew the story would be too incredible and strange to be believed. Maybe he wanted to make space for people to meet him on their own terms, without having heard of him before. Maybe he wanted them to have a miracle story that stayed their own. Whatever Jesus reason, none of it would have happened if Jairus had not been willing to get in some good trouble. His daughter was alive because he was willing to ignore convention and seek hope in unexpected places from a man with a dubious reputation. Like the woman in the crowd, the risk, the trouble changed things. And his family was better for it.

When John Lewis was elected to Congress in 1986, one of his first bills was the creation of a national museum to chronicle the history, culture and successes of Black Americans. The culmination of this bill was passed in 2003 and opened in 2016 as the National Museum of African American History and Culture.

John Lewis taught us persistence. He said his life was defined by "getting into good trouble, necessary trouble. Good trouble always redeems the soul of America." He said, "I was arrested 40 times in the 1960s. I have been arrested another six times as a member of Congress. I imagine it will happen again. But every time I was arrested, I was getting into 'good trouble.' I was challenging unjust laws, unjust practices, and immoral practices."

He continued: "My civil disobedience came from my faith. Like Jesus, I was laying down my life for others. I was always ready to die. I didn't always realize it then, but that non-violent civil disobedience freed me so I could really live a life of peace." John Lewis taught us that when a person has transformative ideas they shouldn't taper those ideas. Instead, they should push those ideas until others get on board.

Just because change is slow doesn't mean change agents have to move slowly towards it. Lewis was a lightning bolt for equity, social change and social justice. We have to continue his legacy, never forget history, pursue equity and get in good trouble.

Are you being called to good trouble? Think about what conventions or preoccupations are keeping you from seeking healing in this world. Good trouble isn't easy and its not smooth.

John Lewis has told us about his good trouble. But, it is so worth it! If the woman and Jairus could talk, I bet they'd agree.

I hope you can find your good trouble. And I hope you know that Jesus is always in the good trouble with you. So, do not fear. Believe, be ready to start some good trouble. Amen.